

Anatole Kaletsky: How EU leaders can prevent a no-deal brexit

Theresa May's strategy of threatening a no-deal Brexit requires a hard deadline that forces her opponents to capitulate. Without that, "running down the clock" becomes "kicking the can down the road," which more accurately reflects May's paradoxical combination of robotic inflexibility and exasperating indecisiveness writes **Anatole Kaletsky**



Source: Shutterstock

Has British Prime Minister Theresa May outmanoeuvred all her opponents? By defeating Parliament's effort to rule out a disorderly "no-deal" rupture between the European Union and its second-largest trading partner, May has redoubled pressure on EU leaders to accept her demands by the Brexit deadline of March 29.

Holding a gun to one's own head is rarely a successful negotiating strategy, as Greece discovered when it threatened to leave the euro. But a collapse of trade with Britain is a far more alarming prospect. Moreover, the main concessions that May is demanding are literally peripheral to every European country except Ireland. It, therefore, seems reasonable to expect that EU leaders will

blink as the Brexit deadline approaches and give May what she wants: exemption from any guarantees to keep open the Irish border and maybe even a promise of completely frictionless trade with the EU.

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May also appears to have outmanoeuvred her domestic opponents. By persuading dozens of Labour MPs not to oppose her in the crucial votes on Brexit, May managed to discredit the Labour Party in the eyes of an entire generation of pro-European young voters. And by persuading Tory Brexiteers that she would magically erase the most objectionable features of the EU withdrawal agreement, May has won herself the possibility of staying in power until the next general election and perhaps beyond.

But this happy outlook for May rests on one crucial assumption: that the March 29 Brexit deadline will remain unchanged. European leaders could easily neutralize May's threat of a no-deal Brexit and therefore eliminate any need to offer the concessions she demands. To do this, they must understand the method behind May's maddening strategy of indecision and delay.

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Throughout her political career, May has used procrastination as a winning strategy. As Home Secretary, she often won battles against other ministers simply by refusing to express her views or even to appear at meetings until minutes before a final decision had to be made.

May's strategy of "running down the clock" often wins, but only if there is a hard deadline that forces her opponents to capitulate. Without that, "running down the clock" becomes "kicking the can down the road," an ineffectual effort to shirk responsibility, reflecting May's paradoxical character traits of robotic inflexibility and exasperating indecisiveness.

Once May's negotiating strategy is properly understood, the EU's rational response becomes obvious: total inflexibility on the Brexit deal's substance, but removal of the Brexit deadline. European leaders should make no concessions of any kind on the withdrawal agreement, allow no shadow of doubt on the commitment to Ireland, and offer no hints about future trade deals. But they should also state publicly that they no longer consider March 29 a hard deadline and would be happy to extend the Brexit negotiating period for as long as is necessary not only to agree on a new UK-EU relationship but also to demonstrate that what is agreed satisfies both sides.

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To lift the deadline of March 29, an arbitrary date that came to dominate the Brexit negotiations only because of a quirk in the EU Treaty, would merely acknowledge what is already happening behind the scenes. European and British officials are already planning for an extension, but both sides are reluctant to admit this publicly because they think the deadline gives them negotiating leverage. Contrary to earlier expectations, however, it should now be clear that the deadline has actually weakened the EU's negotiating position.

It is only the March 29 deadline that has allowed May to weaponize the threat of a no-deal Brexit. Without it, May would be unable to threaten EU leaders with economic chaos and would have no chance of forcing through Parliament a botched withdrawal plan that will never command popular support in Britain and could poison UK-EU relations for years to come.

Now consider what would happen if EU leaders voted to suspend the deadline and offered to continue Brexit negotiations for as long as necessary to reach an agreement that was genuinely satisfactory to both sides.

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May could, in theory, refuse to accept an extension and still insist that Britain would crash out on March 29 if the EU refused her demands for renegotiation or if Parliament failed to support her deal. But in that case, the blame for no-deal chaos would fall entirely on May and her Conservative Party. Under these circumstances, even the most anti-European Labour MPs would not want to vote in favor of a totally arbitrary deadline imposed on Britain by May for purely partisan reasons.

As a result, a clear majority of MPs would almost certainly push through Parliament the legislation that narrowly failed last month. This would remove from UK law the March 29 Brexit deadline and eliminate the possibility of leaving the EU without a deal.

An EU initiative to remove the arbitrary deadline could be the key that unlocks Brexit

But now suppose that Parliament turned down the EU's offer of an extension, perhaps to signal support for May's no-deal threat. Even then, the EU would lose nothing by unilaterally abandoning the March 29 deadline. Those EU leaders planning to capitulate to May's demands at the last moment to avoid a no-deal Brexit could still do this on March 28.

In short, an EU initiative to remove the arbitrary deadline could be the key that unlocks Brexit. Instead of allowing itself to become a captive to May's no-deal threats, the EU could offer Britain the time to seek a national consensus and then decide calmly on its future relationship with Europe, whether a customs union, a Norway-style single market arrangement, an arms-length trade deal, or no Brexit at all. In every successful hostage negotiation, the first crucial step to a breakthrough is to remove the deadline. European leaders should take that step now.

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Author

Alissa Lefebvre

Economist

alissa.lefebvre@ing.com

Deepali Bhargava

Regional Head of Research, Asia-Pacific

Deepali.Bhargava@ing.com

Ruben Dewitte

Economist

+32495364780

ruben.dewitte@ing.com

Kinga Havasi

Economic research trainee

kinga.havasi@ing.com

Marten van Garderen

Consumer Economist, Netherlands

marten.van.garderen@ing.com

David Havrlant

Chief Economist, Czech Republic

420 770 321 486

david.havrlant@ing.com

Sander Burgers

Senior Economist, Dutch Housing

sander.burgers@ing.com

Lynn Song

Chief Economist, Greater China

lynn.song@asia.ing.com

Michiel Tukker

Senior European Rates Strategist

michiel.tukker@ing.com

Michal Rubaszek

Senior Economist, Poland

michal.rubaszek@ing.pl

This is a test author

Stefan Posea

Economist, Romania

tiberiu-stefan.posea@ing.com

Marine Leleux

Sector Strategist, Financials

marine.leleux2@ing.com

Jesse Norcross

Senior Sector Strategist, Real Estate

jesse.norcross@ing.com

Teise Stellema

Research Assistant, Energy Transition

teise.stellema@ing.com

Diederik Stadig

Sector Economist, TMT & Healthcare

diederik.stadig@ing.com

Diogo Gouveia

Sector Economist

diogo.duarte.vieira.de.gouveia@ing.com

Marine Leleux

Sector Strategist, Financials

marine.leleux2@ing.com

Ewa Manthey

Commodities Strategist

ewa.manthey@ing.com

ING Analysts

James Wilson

EM Sovereign Strategist

James.wilson@ing.com

Sophie Smith

Digital Editor

sophie.smith@ing.com

Frantisek Taborsky

EMEA FX & FI Strategist

frantisek.taborsky@ing.com

Adam Antoniak

Senior Economist, Poland

adam.antoniak@ing.pl

Min Joo Kang

Senior Economist, South Korea and Japan

min.joo.kang@asia.ing.com

Coco Zhang

ESG Research

coco.zhang@ing.com

Jan Frederik Slijkerman

Senior Sector Strategist, TMT

jan.frederik.slijkerman@ing.com

Katinka Jongkind

Senior Economist, Services and Leisure

Katinka.Jongkind@ing.com

Marina Le Blanc

Sector Strategist, Financials

Marina.Le.Blanc@ing.com

Samuel Abettan

Junior Economist

samuel.abettan@ing.com

Franziska Biehl

Economist, Germany

Franziska.Marie.Biehl@ing.de

Rebecca Byrne

Senior Editor and Supervisory Analyst

rebecca.byrne@ing.com

Mirjam Bani

Sector Economist, Commercial Real Estate & Public Sector (Netherlands)

mirjam.bani@ing.com

Timothy Rahill

Credit Strategist

timothy.rahill@ing.com

Leszek Kasek

Senior Economist, Poland

leszek.kasek@ing.pl

Oleksiy Soroka, CFA

Senior High Yield Credit Strategist

oleksiy.soroka@ing.com

Antoine Bouvet

Head of European Rates Strategy

antoine.bouvet@ing.com

Jeroen van den Broek

Global Head of Sector Research

jeroen.van.den.broek@ing.com

Edse Dantuma

Senior Sector Economist, Industry and Healthcare

edse.dantuma@ing.com

Francesco Pesole

FX Strategist

francesco.pesole@ing.com

Rico Luman

Senior Sector Economist, Transport and Logistics

Rico.Luman@ing.com

Jurjen Witteveen

Sector Economist

jurjen.witteveen@ing.com

Dmitry Dolgin

Chief Economist, CIS

dmitry.dolgin@ing.de

Nicholas Mapa

Senior Economist, Philippines

nicholas.antonio.mapa@asia.ing.com

Egor Fedorov

Senior Credit Analyst

egor.fedorov@ing.com

Sebastian Franke

Consumer Economist

sebastian.franke@ing.de

Gerben Hieminga

Senior Sector Economist, Energy

gerben.hieminga@ing.com

Nadège Tillier

Head of Corporates Sector Strategy

nadege.tillier@ing.com

Charlotte de Montpellier

Senior Economist, France and Switzerland

charlotte.de.montpellier@ing.com

Laura Straeter

Behavioural Scientist

+31(0)611172684

laura.Straeter@ing.com

Valentin Tataru

Chief Economist, Romania

valentin.tataru@ing.com

James Smith

Developed Markets Economist, UK

james.smith@ing.com

Suvi Platerink Kosonen

Senior Sector Strategist, Financials

suvi.platerink-kosonen@ing.com

Thijs Geijer

Senior Sector Economist, Food & Agri

thijs.geijer@ing.com

Maurice van Sante

Senior Economist Construction & Team Lead Sectors

maurice.van.sante@ing.com

Marcel Klok

Senior Economist, Netherlands

marcel.klok@ing.com

Piotr Poplawski

Senior Economist, Poland
piotr.poplawski@ing.pl

Paolo Pizzoli
Senior Economist, Italy, Greece
paolo.pizzoli@ing.com

Marieke Blom
Chief Economist and Global Head of Research
marieke.blom@ing.com

Raoul Leering
Senior Macro Economist
raoul.leering@ing.com

Maarten Leen
Head of Global IFRS9 ME Scenarios
maarten.leen@ing.com

Maureen Schuller
Head of Financials Sector Strategy
Maureen.Schuller@ing.com

Warren Patterson
Head of Commodities Strategy
Warren.Patterson@asia.ing.com

Rafal Benecki
Chief Economist, Poland
rafal.benecki@ing.pl

Philippe Ledent
Senior Economist, Belgium, Luxembourg
philippe.ledent@ing.com

Peter Virovacz
Senior Economist, Hungary
peter.virovacz@ing.com

Inga Fechner
Senior Economist, Germany, Global Trade
inga.fechner@ing.de

Dimitry Fleming
Senior Data Analyst, Netherlands
Dimitry.Fleming@ing.com

Ciprian Dascalu

Chief Economist, Romania
+40 31 406 8990
ciprian.dascalu@ing.com

Muhammet Mercan
Chief Economist, Turkey
muhammet.mercan@ingbank.com.tr

Iris Pang
Chief Economist, Greater China
iris.pang@asia.ing.com

Sophie Freeman
Writer, Group Research
+44 20 7767 6209
Sophie.Freeman@uk.ing.com

Padhraic Garvey, CFA
Regional Head of Research, Americas
padhraic.garvey@ing.com

James Knightley
Chief International Economist, US
james.knightley@ing.com

Tim Condon
Asia Chief Economist
+65 6232-6020

Martin van Vliet
Senior Interest Rate Strategist
+31 20 563 8801
martin.van.vliet@ing.com

Robert Carnell
Regional Head of Research, Asia-Pacific
robert.carnell@asia.ing.com

Karol Pogorzelski
Senior Economist, Poland
Karol.Pogorzelski@ing.pl

Carsten Brzeski
Global Head of Macro
carsten.brzeski@ing.de

Viraj Patel
Foreign Exchange Strategist

+44 20 7767 6405

viraj.patel@ing.com

Owen Thomas

Global Head of Editorial Content

+44 (0) 207 767 5331

owen.thomas@ing.com

Bert Colijn

Chief Economist, Netherlands

bert.colijn@ing.com

Peter Vanden Houte

Chief Economist, Belgium, Luxembourg, Eurozone

peter.vandenhoute@ing.com

Benjamin Schroeder

Senior Rates Strategist

benjamin.schroeder@ing.com

Chris Turner

Global Head of Markets and Regional Head of Research for UK & CEE

chris.turner@ing.com

Gustavo Rangel

Chief Economist, LATAM

+1 646 424 6464

gustavo.rangel@ing.com

Carlo Cocuzzo

Economist, Digital Finance

+44 20 7767 5306

carlo.cocuzzo@ing.com